

Christian Ethics: Marriage and Sexuality

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Introduction: My Situations

Situation 1: “Dan” is a friend of mine. He’s a Christian. I’ve known him for about 8 years now. We met while we were both working for Intel. He’s about 3 years older than me. He had been married to his wife for 5 or 6 years when she told him that she was very unhappy in their marriage. He was somewhat of a kid, he loved gadgets and hanging out with his guy friends. She felt neglected. Originally, she had married him partly because she enjoyed his sense of humor and energy. But it came to divide them more than unite them, in part because she came from a very broken home and looked to Dan to distract her from her inner pain and sadness. Though both of them said they were Christians, they were kind of young and untested. In fact, two weeks before this shattering disclosure, Dan had prayed that God would mature him, and use any means possible. As they talked more, their estrangement grew. She said that she was already attracted to another man, a man in the office she worked with. In a short time, though, she shared that she was already having an affair with this man. Dan hung on. He said, “I’m still willing to make this work, if we both get counseling.” They got some counseling, but she eventually didn’t want to continue. She didn’t want to face her inner pain and decided that the other man was for her. She moved away with him. I don’t know what this meant for her spiritual life, but her last words to Dan vindicated his attempt to set things straight. She said, “You’ve done all that a godly man could do.” Fortunately they had no children. One year later, Dan met another woman, a divorcee, also with no children, at the church they attended. Personality-wise, she was very much the woman he wanted. They decided to date. He and I had become very close friends throughout this whole episode, so he asked me what I thought about the possibility of getting remarried. What would you say?

Situation 2 is this. I’ve known “Edward” for 10 years now. Edward and I met and became friends in 1994, after we both graduated from Stanford. He became one of my closest friends, maybe the closest non-Christian friend I’ve ever had. He’s flown out to Boston and I to California to see each other. One day, a few years into our friendship, he and I were hiking a trail off Skyline Drive in the coastal range of Northern California. It was one of those great far-ranging conversations, and we were talking about my faith. He asked me what I thought about meeting his dad. Edward had already told me a few months ago that his dad left his mom when Edward was very young. His dad had left the family because he decided he was gay and that, try as he might, he couldn’t change. He had eventually found a partner, and they had a stable relationship that had lasted for more than 10 years now. Edward had maintained a surprisingly good relationship with his dad. His dad and his partner were coming out to visit Edward, and Edward was wondering if I wanted to join them for dinner, but he also wanted to know what I thought and how I would handle that. As Edward and I turned away from the glorious view overlooking all the bay area, we turned to the very sobering topic of homosexuality, Christianity, and his dad. What would you say?

And more importantly, why would you say what you say? These kinds of issues press us to *think* very deeply about the ideals of God and to *feel* very deeply with the needs of the world. This discussion may cause some of you to feel uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable to talk about. Yet these are issues where truth must win out over fashion. And if Christians are going to have anything constructive to say in a loving way, we have to know how to reason from the Scriptures on important issues like these.

Scripture

We’re going to look first at Matthew, because Matthew has Jesus saying the most about marriage than the other Gospels. I’m going to look at a few passages – not a lot – but I’m going to make sure we understand context first. So we’ll look briefly at the other Scriptures that mention marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

SEE HANDOUT

Christian Ethics: Marriage and Sexuality

Marriage and Divorce: Matthew 5:31 – 32ff.

^{5:31} And it was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal’; ³² but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of *porneia*, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. ³³ Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord’... ³⁷ But let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no...

Marriage and Divorce: Matthew 19:3 – 12

^{19:3} Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing him and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?” ⁴ And he answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, ⁵ and said, ‘FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH’? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” ⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY?” ⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. ⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia*, and marries another woman commits adultery.” ¹⁰ The disciples said to him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” ¹¹ But he said to them, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.”

Summary Points

1. The Pharisees ask about the legitimate grounds for divorce, but Jesus’ immediate response (v.4-5) gives no grounds for it. Only his secondary follow-up response does.
 - a. This is very significant in terms of emphasis; do we give the same initial response?
2. To treat the subject more fully, Jesus discusses God’s original design for marriage; he defines marriage as monogamous, heterosexual, and binding.
 - a. Monogamous: ‘two become one’
 - b. Heterosexual: ‘male and female’
 - c. Binding: ‘God has joined together, let no man separate’
3. Jesus saw this as God’s intent in the original Creation.
 - a. Marriage ‘from the beginning’ (in v.4 and v.8) did not include divorce. The intermediate ‘divorce certificate’ of Dt.24:1 – 4 was ‘permitted’ and not ‘commanded.’ Notice the critical shift in language from the Pharisees’ question (‘Why then did Moses *command*’) to Jesus’ response (‘Moses *permitted*’).
 - b. Jesus quotes from both Creation accounts (Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 in v.4 and Genesis 2:4 – 25 in v.5) to affirm monogamous, heterosexual, and binding marriage as God’s original intent.
 - c. Jesus did not have to refer to ‘male and female’ (Gen.1:28) to answer the Pharisees. But by defining God’s original intent for marriage more comprehensively, Jesus makes clear that ‘male and female’ is not an optional inclusion. God’s intent for marriage is for a union/reunion of ‘male and female.’
4. Jesus identifies *God’s authorial intent in Scripture* with respect to this issue (!)
 - a. By saying, ‘Have you not read...?’ Jesus means that Genesis 1 – 2 was written for a reason: to remind us of what had once been. Any Christian reflection on marriage must start with Genesis, treating it as normative.
 - b. *God* authored Genesis, not just Moses. *He who created them...said.* i.e. The Creator God *said* the words of Genesis 2:24!!! (and presumably the entirety of the Pentateuch!)
 - c. Jesus believed the teaching of Genesis on marriage was absolutely authoritative on these points.

5. This is hard for us to hear because we live after the Enlightenment.
 - a. Especially because of Rousseau, we believe ‘the individual’ (e.g. ‘noble savage’) came first chronologically, and all relationships are therefore optional social contracts to be discarded when they become burdensome. This is where both Genesis and secular history flatly disagree.
 - b. In Genesis, monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong marriage precedes the individual, for it existed in the mind of God before He even brought humanity into being. We have been created to fit into God’s ideal for human marriage, not to alter it, or to reverse the order of being and place ‘the individual’ first. God’s creation order comes before ‘the individual.’
 - c. The historical existence of monogamy challenges Enlightenment philosophy. Social scientists, especially those influenced by the theory of evolution, have struggled to explain why monogamy exists at all. Modern day socio-biologists are puzzled since monogamy does not serve a man’s self-interest. Monogamy has some disadvantage to a woman, since it does not allow her to share the often life-threatening burden of child birthing. So why did monogamy come about on its own? It is difficult to explain from a secular Enlightenment standpoint. Yet monogamous marriage, while certainly not the only form of marriage, is an ancient phenomenon.¹ Not only has it existed in historical reality, it is built into the fabric of ancient myths. For example, in the Greek myths, Zeus is married to Hera; and even when he cheats on her, this is understood to be mischievous and dangerous.
 - i. Important Note: Those who subscribe to Enlightenment liberalism (the individual is supreme in principle) cannot explain history (i.e. why we see monogamy in history). Enlightenment liberalism makes for a poor theory of history.
 - d. While it is true that the fall has corrupted humanity so that marriage is sometimes twisted into polygamous forms, or fractured by adultery, etc., this was already described in Genesis 4 when Lamech took two wives. In essence, then, secular history supports the Genesis account, since it suggests that monogamous marriage is woven into our internal existence.
6. Jesus believed God’s original intention for marriage would be revived now that he removes ‘hardness of heart’ from his people.
 - a. This is clear by the heart-transformation theme in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:31 – 32, and in the parallels, Mark 10:2 – 10 and Luke 16:18.
 - b. The very structure of Matthew’s Gospel as a New Covenant reinforces this message.
 - c. The disciples find this vision of marriage difficult and off-handedly affirm singleness (v.10); Jesus agrees with their affirmation of singleness for some (v.11-12).
7. Jesus saw the sin of *porneia* as an acceptable (but not automatic) grounds for divorce
 - a. *Porneia* (fornication) might include *moicheia* (adultery) but it might not. Why does Matthew not use *moicheia*? And how broadly does he mean *porneia*? Note: I believe *porneia* means *sex before marriage while single*, not inclusive of *moicheia*, which specifically means *adultery: sex outside of marriage while married*.
 - b. The precise reasoning is debated, but I believe it most likely includes a problem that could arise within a culture of parent-arranged marriages, and certainly Matthew’s Jewish Christian audience in particular. For instance, Matthew narrates that Joseph thought Mary was guilty of illicit relations while they were engaged. Since she conceived a child, she could have been accused of *porneia*, but technically not *moicheia*. Joseph’s initial impulse was to ‘divorce’ her (Mt.1:19), incidentally exemplifying how one could legitimately cancel an engagement on grounds of *porneia*. The Mosaic Law demonstrates how an engaged woman is already the ‘wife’ of the man she is betrothed to (Dt.22:23-24). Thus, Matthew probably includes the exception clause for two reasons:

¹ Ancient Babylon and Assyria were monogamous in principle according to R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, London 1980, p. 24 and M. Stol, ‘Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia,’ in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, J. M. Sasson (ed.), J. Baines, G. Beckman, K. S. Rubinson (assist. ed.), vol. 1. New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1995, pp. 488-493; cf. Martha T. Roth, *Age at Marriage and the Household: A Study of the Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian Forms*, “Comparative Studies in Society and History” 29 (1987), and *Babylonian Marriage Agreements 7th – 3rd Centuries BC* (1989). Ancient Egypt was also monogamous according to G. Pinch, ‘Private Life in Ancient Egypt’ in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, J. M. Sasson (ed.), pp. 370 -371.

- i. to address the problem posed within Jewish culture in particular, and perhaps cultures of parent-initiated engagements more broadly, and
 - ii. to help explain why Joseph's initial impulse to divorce Mary did not disqualify him from being labeled 'a righteous man.'
- c. Jesus teaches that divorce is permissible (though never desirable) in only two clear situations:
 - i. If the couple is betrothed, pre-marital sex with someone else.
 - ii. If the couple is married, adultery.
- d. Breaking either a marriage or a betrothal is a violation of the one-flesh sexual union meant exclusively for husband and wife. Divorce is therefore a formal acknowledgement of that violation. But what does that mean for remarriage? Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 addresses it, but we must consider other relevant passages as well.

Divorce and Remarriage: Mark 10:11 – 12, Luke 16:18, 1 Corinthians 7:10 – 11, 39 – 40

Luke 16:18 Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.

Mark 10:11 Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her [probably the first wife];¹² and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.

1 Cor.7:10 But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband¹¹ but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband, and that the husband should not divorce his wife...³⁹ A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.⁴⁰ But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.

Summary Points

8. Except for widows and widowers, Jesus saw remarriage as always involving some level of sin.
 - a. Even when the other spouse has committed adultery.
 - i. Presumably because it further degrades the binding nature of the original marriage and ends the possibility of reconciliation.
 - b. Though not recorded in the Gospels, Jesus addressed marital reconciliation, as shown by Paul's comments in 1 Cor.7:10 – 11.
 - i. 'I give instructions, not I, but the Lord' in v.10 signifies that an existing teaching of Jesus is simply being passed down. This teaching is about reconciliation.
 - ii. Elsewhere (1 Cor.7:12, 25), Paul deduces from Jesus' existing sayings a response to a situation Jesus himself did not address in advance ('To the rest I say, not the Lord'). To do this, however, Paul claims the authority of the Spirit in v.40.
9. For precision's sake, we must consider Matthew 19:9 alongside the other passages listed. If your spouse commits adultery, can you get a divorce *and* remarry someone else? If so, whom can you remarry? We have to choose between five different options as to the meaning of Matthew 19:9 and its relation to the other texts.
 - a. Here are the options. If your spouse commits adultery, you can:
 - i. Option 1: Divorce your spouse and marry someone else; that person can be (1) previously unmarried or (2) previously married but similarly sinned against, but (3) that person must not have committed adultery before.
 - ii. Option 2: Divorce your spouse and marry someone else who has not been previously married.
 - iii. Option 3: Divorce your spouse and either later reconcile or remain unmarried
 - iv. Option 4: Cancel your betrothal before you consummate your engagement, and become betrothed to and marry someone else.
 - v. Option 5: Remain married, or consummate your betrothal, and work on your marriage relationship.
 - b. I believe Option 1, while being possible and attractive at first glance, requires that exegetical assumptions be carefully stated.

- i. The textual difficulty with this view is that Matthew 5:32, Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:11-12 tell us that a marriage to *any* previously married person (with no qualifications, such as the person's reason for a prior divorce) is adultery. Therefore, part (2) of Option 1 might be too lenient. See below for more details.
 - ii. Once cultural and historical factors, especially those of Jewish Law and first century society, are considered, Option 1 becomes less likely.
 - iii. Option 1 is linguistically possible only if 'fornication' includes 'adultery,' an assumption I question, below.
 - c. I believe Option 2 is technically possible, but unlikely.
 - i. Matthew 5:32, Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:11-12 tell us that a marriage to any previously married person (with no qualifications, such as the person's reason for a prior divorce) is adultery, so one must remarry a previously unmarried person.
 - ii. If the *porneia* exception clause of Matthew 19:9 pertains to adultery by a spouse, then Option 3 would be too stringent.
 - iii. But this privileges Matthew over Mark and Luke on this issue. While this is acceptable under certain conditions, it leads to certain logical problems in other cases.
 - 1. A lower view of Scripture says that Matthew simply added a clause that was not part of Jesus' original teaching.
 - 2. A higher view of Scripture says that Mark and Luke offer instances of Jesus' teaching that serves another purpose in the placement of the narratives. In other words, Mark and Luke could be using the basic teaching of Jesus for multiple purposes, and they could assume that their audience would receive the exception clause through other teaching.
 - 3. The question of why Mark and Luke do not include the *porneia* clause of Matthew 19:9 still goes fundamentally unanswered.
 - 4. The question of why Matthew uses the word *porneia* and not *moicheia* is glossed over.
 - d. I believe Option 4, however, is exegetically possible and most likely. Several factors are involved:
 - i. *Word choice.* Why does Matthew 19:9 (and 5:32) not use the most precise word, 'adultery' (*moicheia*)? After all, Matthew 19:9 envisions a couple who can legitimately be considered married. All extra-marital sexual sin is technically 'adultery' for a couple that is technically married, with one exception noted below. Thus, Matthew's use of the word 'fornication' (*porneia*) is unusual.
 - ii. *Cultural context.* The only way Matthew's use of *porneia* makes real sense is if we view it within the culture of betrothals and arranged marriages (i.e. first century Jewish culture in particular, but also in others that resemble it). Under these conditions, extra-marital sexual sin is technically 'fornication' (*porneia*) and not 'adultery' (*moicheia*), even though the couple is in some sense 'married' so that canceling a betrothal would be a 'divorce.' Traditional betrothal did carry more serious social weight than the practice of 'engagement' in, say, the United States in the twenty-first century. If this were the case, Matthew would be teaching: 'If your betrothed commits fornication with someone else, you can get a divorce and remarry someone else without sinning.' I believe Matthew is using 'fornication' as *not inclusive* of 'adultery' to denote this case.
 - iii. *Consistency with the Mosaic Law.* The definition of fornication as not inclusive of adultery is found consistently in the Mosaic legislation, the basis for Jewish culture. For example, the Law states: If, on his wedding night, a husband discovers that his wife is not a virgin, and he can prove this by the absence of bloodstains on their bed sheet, he may bring her to the doorway of her father's house and the men of the city must stone her (Dt.22:13-21, see also the examples in v.23-29). Apparently by the first century, the penalty for this crime was generally relaxed from death to divorce, though these issues continued to have their zealots (cf. Jn.8:1-11).
 - 1. This meant that the man had been tricked into thinking that he was forming a uniquely holy covenant with his wife, whereas in reality she had been

sexually united with another man beforehand. She would have been guilty of *porneia*, but not *moicheia*.

2. **Thus, I believe ‘fornication’ means *sex prior to marriage*. I do not believe it includes ‘adultery,’ which means *extramarital sex during marriage*. This is consistent with situational concerns treated in the Mosaic Law, and is not at all contradicted by the word usage of the New Testament, where both words appear in lists of sins. To further support this, more research on word usage would need to be done with other Hebrew and Greek (Classical/Koine) documents.**
 3. It is far more likely that Jesus would have commented on classical Jewish cases given his theological and cultural context. Therefore it is far more likely that Matthew 19:9 only safeguards a future marriage for a betrothed spouse who did not commit *porneia*.
 - iv. *Consistency with Mark, Luke, and Genesis 1 – 2*. Read this way, Matthew is more logically consistent with Mark and Luke about marriage, in the sense that prior sexual union with someone else violates a future marriage. In this view, *Matthew simply expands on a case Mark and Luke do not cover, rather than give an exception for what they do*. In this reading, Matthew safeguards a future marriage for a righteous betrothed person.
 1. Given Mark’s equal treatment of men and women, it seems reasonable for Matthew 19:9 to apply to a woman who discovers that her husband-to-be had committed *porneia*.
 2. It seems that if dishonesty is involved during the betrothal, theological ethics gives place to the significance of sexual union, and perhaps social honor as well.
 - v. *Suspicion of Western Cultural Influence on Exegesis*.
 1. Given the strict sexual standards set forth in Jewish Law and society concerning pre-marital conduct, and given that Jesus heightens those standards, it is not likely that Matthew 19:9 guarantees Christians a ‘right’ to seek another, more ‘pristine’ marriage.
 2. The remarriage-after-adultery trajectory demonstrates an attitude of entitlement with regards to one’s own marital satisfaction. It shows the influence of a present-only orientation where one says, ‘My current marriage, whatever my past, is all that counts.’ It does not show commitment to the high theological significance of the earlier sexual union and of the original marriage as it was intended, despite its current state.
 3. Thus, I believe Matthew 19:9 protects the theological ideal of marriage *for God*, rather than protect a particular individual to have a remarriage option after betrayal.
 - e. Here are my responses to the options above. If your spouse commits adultery, you can:
 - i. Divorce your spouse and marry someone else; that person can be (1) previously unmarried or (2) previously married but similarly sinned against. [NO]
 - ii. Divorce your spouse and marry someone else who has not been previously married. [NO]
 - iii. Divorce your spouse and either later reconcile or remain unmarried. [YES]
 - iv. Cancel your betrothal before you consummate your engagement, and become betrothed to and marry someone else. [YES]
 - v. Remain married, or consummate your betrothal, and work on your marriage relationship. [YES]
10. One’s original marriage is so binding that it continues to exist and have spiritual implications even after divorce. Due to the binding nature of marriage from God’s perspective:
- a. A divorced person has two primary options: reconcile or wait (1 Cor.7:10 – 11). Jesus probably had in mind God divorcing Israel and promising ‘reconciliation’ with her (e.g. Hosea 2:2 – 20, Isaiah 54:6). God did not marry (i.e. form another covenant with) someone else. Rather, to fulfill His promises, God ‘reconciled’ himself with Israel through Jesus in the new covenant (e.g. Rom.5:10 – 11, 2 Cor.5:18 – 20), from which the Gentiles also benefit.

Thus, reconciliation with one's ex-spouse symbolizes the restoration and resumption of covenant love through the new covenant, which fits once again with the very structure of Matthew's Gospel as a new covenant charter document.

- b. While an ex-spouse is living, marrying someone else is 'serial polygamy.' Such a person cannot be called 'monogamous' as Jesus would define it.
- c. With this understanding, other New Testament documents can be viewed as limiting certain (not all) forms of leadership to people who were truly monogamous.
 - i. "An elder, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife..." (1 Tim.3:2, Titus 1:5 – 6; so too deacons, 1 Tim.3:12)
 - ii. While the above exegesis of the requirements for elders and deacons is not airtight, it should be considered.

11. Implications for Other Cases:

- a. While any extra-marital relationship (adultery) should be terminated immediately, one should consider more complex factors if a formal remarriage has already been sexually consummated while an ex-spouse is living. The situation most closely resembles a polygamous situation where an earlier spouse is estranged. The previous Points 7, 8, and 9 should be acknowledged.
- b. If a marriage has already been sexually consummated and prior *porneia* is discovered (i.e. dishonesty was involved, memories were suppressed), it is debatable whether Matthew 19:9 or any of the texts above would automatically permit the offended spouse to divorce *and* remarry.
 - i. The logic of Matthew 19:9 could go in either direction regarding remarriage:
 - 1. Preferred: The couple should be instructed to stay married. The reasoning: If only a betrothed couple can have a divorce righteously, then since this particular marriage is already fully consummated, this condition does not give the offended spouse permission to divorce and remarry someone else. Again, in this view, Matthew 19:9 only safeguards a future marriage for a betrothed spouse who did not commit *porneia*. It does not guarantee a right to another 'holy' marriage once a marriage is fully in effect. This is consistent with Option 4, above.
 - 2. Not Preferred: The couple could be permitted to divorce, with the offended spouse given permission to remarry but also encouraged to reconcile with the ex-spouse. The reasoning: In this view, Matthew 19:9 safeguards the right to a holy union with a spouse who did not commit *porneia* prior to marriage. A fully married couple can therefore divorce, since the *porneia* committed earlier by one spouse diminishes the value of the current marriage. This is consistent with Option 2, above.
 - ii. Although the OT consequence was quite serious (death), it is impossible that Jesus would endorse the same penalty, but it is likely that Jesus would perceive the same issues.
 - iii. Likely, we must emphasize the value of the existing marriage, which is now revealing a regrettable history but which should also be respected. In the Old Testament, polygamy seems to be preferable to divorce and remarriage (e.g. Abraham, Jacob, Elkanah, David, etc.) for similar reasons. With polygamy, the sanctity of the sexual union is still observed, albeit in a much poorer fashion because it is not monogamous. (So, too, women are protected from the poverty and despair that would be caused by divorce in traditional cultures.)
- c. If a Christian is honest about previous fornication, significant discernment and caution should be used. Although this does not allow for consistent determination in all cases, the person should not be automatically permitted nor denied a future marriage. Various factors should be accounted for, namely the conditions of the prior sexual involvement (e.g. age, emotional maturity, other sinful factors like incest, prostitution or cohabitation with an unbeliever, likelihood of reconciliation and healthy marriage with the person, etc.) A 'eunuch' status should be seriously considered, though not made mandatory.

- d. How should sexual unions or even marriages and divorces prior to one's conversion to Christ be regarded? This is indeterminate. Paul's teaching in 1 Cor.5-7 should be consulted, but even that section of teaching does not give a clear answer.

The Decisions, an Ethical Approach

So let's come back to the two situations I was in. Me and Dan. When Dan told me that he had met another woman, what did I think of remarriage? I asked him, "Well, I care about you, so let me make sure I understand what's going on." Obviously I asked him who she was, and how they met, how her faith in Jesus is, where he is emotionally after the divorce. One of the questions I asked was, "Is there any hope for reconciliation with your ex-wife?" He said that he would reconcile, but that it depends on her, and she had moved away with the other man; so far as he knew, she was not coming back. At the time, I had not reflected on this teaching as carefully. I knew God could work out reconciliation even after divorce. But I hadn't processed fully the seriousness of one's original marriage. Also, since I wasn't married at the time, I wasn't sure how to speak to someone who had been married and divorced. The fact that Dan was 3 years older than me also intimidated me somewhat. The end result is that I left it at that. He later married this new woman. I attended the wedding. But if that conversation were to happen today, with what I know now, I would say something like this: "Dan, I love you as a brother and a friend. I want the absolute best for you. And I want us to be friends after I say this. From what I understand of what Jesus and the NT writers say, is that remarriage always involves some level of sin. What do you think about that?" And who knows? Maybe he would have chosen otherwise?

Here's the second situation. As Edward and I hiked back down, we had that conversation about his dad and my faith that both he and I expected to have for the past few months. We both knew this was a pivotal moment for our friendship. My journal has a more accurate blow by blow account. But basically, I said, "I would love to meet your dad. He sounds like a great guy, and I always enjoy meeting my friends' parents. I know that Christians have been angry and bitter and homophobic in addressing homosexuality, and I feel very badly about that. I don't think God 'hates gays and lesbians' as some picket signs claim. I believe Jesus loves your dad as much as he does anyone. But that doesn't mean I or my faith have no ideals about human relationships. God's ideal for marriage is that it is a loving relationship that is monogamous, heterosexual, and intended for a lifetime. [If I were speaking now, I would intensify that last part to 'binding' in the sense that I just described.] So homosexual activity is not God's ideal for human relationships; and the Bible does speak of it as one of many possible sins we can commit." He asked me whether it's possible that my opinion would change in the future. I said, "Well, that's a good question. I don't see that happening. Let me say, for what it's worth, that I didn't start off believing this. Before I was a Christian, and even as a younger Christian, I did think homosexuality was perfectly okay, but when I later studied Scripture, I realized that I couldn't hold that position anymore. It wasn't the first or the last time that I had to change my opinions if I was going to say I really believed this." We paused. Then at the end, I basically said, "I understand if you feel hurt – I know this conversation isn't easy for you, either. But like I said before, I would still enjoy meeting your dad – that is, if you're still game for it." We said sure. We agreed to disagree on this whole topic; he said that this was one of the reasons he didn't want to move forward in knowing Jesus; I said I understand. We had dinner with his dad and his dad's partner several weeks later. We had a good time talking; on his dad's next visit, we went out again. Somehow our friendship still grew, and I still pray for Edward and all of his family to come to Jesus. So that was that.

Now if that conversation were to happen today, I would still say the same things. But I'm sure we would actually talk about more aspects of the issue. For one, I would state more strongly how much I disagree with some of the insulting tactics used by some people against homosexuals. I was not as aware then as I am today about the unnecessary insults homosexuals have endured.

Secondly, there is more information coming out of scientific circles that I'm sure both of us would talk about. Both of us feel that scientific information is inconclusive anyway, but I'm sure we would talk about things like: one of the leading psychiatrists in the field changed his opinion about what homosexuality is. He was instrumental 2-3 decades ago in revising DSM3 to DSM4 (the diagnostic manual used by all psychiatrists that reflects all the knowledge in the field). He said at that time that homosexuality is not changeable, and therefore must be considered normal. But recently he's concluded that homosexuality is changeable – that sexuality is fluid, not an identity like race or ethnicity – because of all the cases he's seen of sexuality changing. I'm sure we would talk about that. I'm sure we would talk about the latest in genetic research showing how DNA can be miscoded as the body reproduces it, which adds a new dimension to the whole nature vs. nurture debate but pushes the issue back to what is a normative DNA

sequence without the mistaken coding. But again, I think both of us would say that scientific information alone doesn't create a binding vision of sexual ethics, though it's very interesting.

Thirdly, Edward would certainly ask me where I stood politically, on gay marriage and other issues, since his dad lives in MA. And this is what I would say: "I like what Stephen Carter, an African-American Christian law professor at Yale, talks about. My preferred position is that the government permits civil unions for everyone. I can be for civil unions for gay couples with the tax benefits and spouse-like rights. But I think the word marriage should not be defined by the government because marriage is fundamentally a faith-informed question. Different faith traditions have different definitions of marriage, and I think there needs to be some room in the public square for these different definitions. The problem I have with the militant wing of the gay community pressing to define 'marriage' as 'between any two consenting adults, regardless of gender' is that this definition will then be used as THE standard in public schools and other public places. For example, I am now a father of two children. The public school system in some places is already hostile towards faith communities. The phrase tossed around among teachers is, 'Bring your whole self.' So if you're a gay teacher, you can talk about your partner in front of 1st graders. But a Christian teacher won't be able to talk about what she believes; and will I be able to tell my kids that they can disagree openly with their gay teachers? This will affect not just Christians, but Muslims, conservative Jews, and maybe others. I think that the public sphere needs to be a place where different ideas are brought into dialogue. I think the militant side of the gay community wants to create a monolithic secular state in response to the monolithic Christian state of the Puritans and the Religious Right. But I'm for political pluralism. Not theological pluralism, but political pluralism. I think political tolerance is the trajectory of the New Testament. So I want to preserve a space for you in public discourse, but I also want a space for me. I think the original vision of the First Amendment is exactly that, and I believe we cannot force our definitions of marriage on one another through the legal system because we would infringe on each other's First Amendment rights." That's my preferred position.

Appendix A: A Spectrum of Christian Political Opinions on Gay Marriage

Seven Historical and Theoretical Options for Christians

1. Sodomy is illegal.
2. Sodomy is not illegal, but no civil unions for gay couples
3. Civil unions for gay couples, with no tax and legal benefits
4. Civil unions for gay couples, with full 'marriage-like' benefits without using the word 'marriage' to label it
5. Civil unions only for all couples. The state does not do 'marriages' because 'marriage' is a religious First Amendment issue.
6. Gay marriages in the public square, not just civil unions, but not in the church
7. Gay marriages everywhere, including in the church

Comments:

1. Position 1 is hypocritical and insensitive; why is this sin singled out? We have no record of the early church taking up this type of role in political discourse and no biblical grounds for the church to play such a polarizing role in local politics.

2. Position 7 is biblically indefensible.

3. Therefore, I believe positions 2-6 are theoretically possible from a biblical standpoint. However, several other considerations must be weighed.

4. I believe position 6 is naïve and will, because of the mechanics of establishing definitions at the state and federal levels, lead to the exclusion of religious discourse in the public sphere, and therefore Christians should oppose it.

5. I believe positions 2, 3, and 4 will lead to a large amount of Christian resources being devoted to maintaining them. They will also lead to the one-sided politicization of an issue that will hurt us in evangelism because to become a Christians will mean voting in this manner. They will probably also lead to people leaving the church, especially those who struggle with homosexual tendencies themselves; these people might otherwise remain in Christian fellowship and receive some measure of healing.

6. I believe position 5 could become a theoretical equilibrium point based on current constitutional theory, and therefore not be contentious when it comes to evangelism. I like what Stephen Carter, an African-American Christian law professor at Yale, talks about. My preferred position is that the government only do civil unions for everyone. I can be for civil unions for gay couples with the tax benefits and spouse-like rights. But I think the word marriage should not be defined by the government because marriage is fundamentally a faith-informed question. Different faith traditions have different definitions of marriage, and I think there needs to be some room in the public square for these different definitions. The problem I have with the militant side of the gay community pressing to define 'marriage' as 'between any two consenting adults, regardless of gender' is that this definition will then be used as THE standard in public schools and other public places. For example, the public school system in some places is already hostile towards faith communities. The phrase tossed around among teachers is, 'Bring your whole self.' So if you're a gay teacher, you can talk about your partner in front of 1st graders. But a Christian teacher won't be able to talk about what she believes; and will I be able to tell my kids that they can disagree openly with their gay teachers in front of the classroom? This will affect not just Christians, but Muslims, conservative and orthodox Jews, and maybe others. I think that the public sphere needs to be a place where different ideas are brought into dialogue. I think the militant side of the gay community wants to create a monolithic secular state in response to the monolithic 'Christian state' of the Puritans and the Religious Right. But I'm for political pluralism. Not theological pluralism, but political pluralism. I think political tolerance is the trajectory of the New Testament. So I want to preserve a space for others in public discourse, but I also want a space for me. I think the original vision of the First Amendment is exactly that, and I believe we cannot force our definitions of marriage on one another through the legal system because we would infringe on each other's First Amendment rights. Position 5 will therefore help Muslims and conservative

and orthodox Jews (and perhaps others) maintain a space in public discourse, which is of value in Christian witness to them.

7. However, position 5 would require a substantial revision of all written law, since the word 'marriage' would need to be replaced by the phrase 'civil union.' This is not likely to happen anytime soon in the current political environment, especially while the militant wing of the gay community is lobbying for 'marriage' to include gay couples. Thus, it is perhaps regrettably necessary that Christians oppose 'gay marriage' as it is currently being lobbied for, but we need to raise the First Amendment issue and shift discourse over to position 5 as quickly as possible.

8. Regarding a 'marriage amendment' to the constitution, such as the one proposed by President Bush: I view this as biblically possible, but I oppose it on both pragmatic and politically ideological grounds. Again, I see 'marriage' as involving different definitions based on what faith community one stands (or does not stand) in. Therefore, I believe 'marriage' is a First Amendment issue, and understand a 'marriage amendment' as an encroachment on what the First Amendment stands for. (Viewed from another angle, how can the state regulate a Christian sacrament? Why should it?) In my limited understanding of constitutional law and its outworking, I think that position 5 is the only equilibrium situation politically. Also, as stated earlier, I am pragmatically concerned for how Christian resources are used and how people might be alienated unnecessarily from Jesus. Constitutional amendments can be passed, true, but they can also be repealed (e.g. prohibition) and Christians are likely to lose this battle, too, after dedicating a lot of unnecessary resources towards it and alienating a lot of people. Though I could be wrong if Latino Catholic immigration continues at significant levels and the Latino community can be politically mobilized along conservative lines. Those are rather large uncertainties, however, and are overruled as considerations (in my mind) by the desire to hold firm to a political pluralism ideologically.